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LEMAY AND OLDS: GREAT CAPTAINS OF AIRPOWER

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Barry Strauss, in his book *Masters of Command*, argued that the three traditional great captains, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Julius Cesar all possessed ten qualities: ambition, judgment, leadership, audacity, agility, infrastructure, strategy, terror, branding, and a tenth quality, which happened *to* them, Divine Providence. While these qualities answered what was required of ancient great commanders, some have little application to the modern battlefield and specifically to airpower leadership. This is natural given Christopher Gabel's recognition in the book *Great Commanders* that great commanders face "particular challenges in operating within the social norms of [their] day and age. These norms govern how leaders are selected, who serves in the military, and to what purpose military operations are conducted. The great commander recognizes these norms, and extracts the maximum possible military effectiveness from them."¹ Given the modern day norms of civilian control and a highly organized professional force based on meritocracy and not heredity, which of Strauss' qualities best apply to modern airpower leaders?

General Curtis Lemay and Brigadier General Robin Olds' careers provide insight to this question by comparing their performance to Strauss' qualities and the first of his great commanders, Alexander. Lemay was a predictable choice for a great airpower leader. Gabel and his coeditor James Willbanks chose Lemay for examination in their book *Great Commanders*; writing that "Lemay brought pre-nuclear strategic bombing to its apogee in an aerial campaign that epitomized 'total' war, in the 20th Century."² Curtis Lemay commanded and flew B-17s in Europe and B-29s in the Pacific during World War II. He chose to firebomb Tokyo and his command dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following the

¹ Christopher R. Gabel and James H. Willbanks, eds., *Great Commanders* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

WWII, he revitalized Strategic Air Command (SAC) shaping it in his image and set the tone for early US nuclear doctrine. Olds was a more unconventional choice for a great commander having never led a combat unit above a wing, but his leadership of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) during Vietnam made him and it a legend. A veteran WWII combat pilot, he conceived and planned the first successful fighter sweep of the Vietnam War always leading from the front. Both of these men, excelled at Strauss' qualities of leadership, audacity, agility, and infrastructure. Like Alexander, they struggled to find the agility required beyond the battlefield in the political arena.

Leadership is the most indispensable of Strauss' ten qualities. Leadership was more than command to Strauss, men followed Alexander not only because he was their king but also because he earned their respect.³ This aligns with Olds' concept of formal and informal authority.⁴ Alexander exemplified informal leadership sharing the hardships of the campaign and the danger of battle with his men;⁵ often leading his Companion Cavalry from the front into the center of the carnage at battles such as Gaugamela.⁶ Alexander, according to Strauss, possessed "special personal qualities that inspired others on a deep, emotional level."⁷ He did this effectively during the Opis Mutiny in 324 BCE by reminding his Macedonian soldiers of the glory they had won together and gained their support for future campaigns.⁸ Lemay and Olds, like Alexander, led from the front and used their personal example to inspire their men displaying Strauss' quality of leadership early in their commands.

³ Barry Strauss, *Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and the Genius of Leadership* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2012), 8.

⁴ Robin Olds, "The Challenge of Leadership," in *Frontiers of Leadership*, Air Force Office of Scientific Research (Arlington, VA: Air Force Systems Command, 1970), 94.

⁵ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 238.

⁶ Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2004), 180-181.

⁷ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 8.

⁸ Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 158-159.

Lemay convinced his B-17 crews to change bombing tactics two months into his command of the 305th Bomb Group by leading from the front in battle. Lemay took command in September 1942 and immediately began work to improve formation flying and bombing performance.⁹ At the time, bomb crews were maneuvering during their bomb runs to avoid German flak and fighters.¹⁰ Lemay concluded that this resulted in bombs missing the target requiring additional missions.¹¹ He calculated the number of anti-aircraft rounds required to hit a B-17 using an ROTC artillery textbook and experience from his time at Ohio State arriving at 372 rounds.¹² Based on this calculation he determined that straight and level bombing was survivable. The bomber crews did not take well to the order to bomb straight and level during their mission briefing fearing they would be shot down.¹³ Lemay stepped into the breach, much like Alexander, and led from the front. He would fly the lead aircraft sharing the fate of his men and demonstrating the utmost confidence in his plan.¹⁴ The Lemay “ten second bomb run” was a great success placing twice as many bombs on target than any other group with minimal losses.¹⁵ Lemay led from the front and proved it was possible; his tactics were adopted across the 8th Air Force.¹⁶

Olds, a WWII veteran like Lemay, also led from the front. He set this tone as he assumed command of the 8th TFW. While he was a combat veteran, he did not have experience in Vietnam, but his men did. He challenged them to teach him the ropes and that with their help he

⁹ Barrett Tillman, *Lemay* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), vi.

¹⁰ Warren Kozak, *Lemay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis Lemay* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2009), 94-95.

¹¹ Ibid., 98.

¹² Ibid., 100-102.

¹³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

was going to eventually lead missions into North Vietnam.¹⁷ He finished by saying, “I will listen to you and learn from you, but soon I’m gonna be better than all of you, and when I know more about your job than you do look out.”¹⁸ He ultimately led Operation BOLO, the first and most successful fighter sweep of the Vietnam War.

While all three men ranked high on their ability to foster informal authority, they were not shy about using their formal powers. As Strauss put it, “They were masters of reward and punishment.”¹⁹ Alexander paid his Macedonian troops well and ensured their widows and families would be cared for.²⁰ In 324 BCE, Alexander blessed the informal unions of many of his troops, wedding them to Persian women and providing a wedding gift in hopes of uniting his empire culturally.²¹ Lemay also issued rewards in hopes of building an empire – SAC. Lemay established a separate promotion system for SAC.²² He wanted top performing crews promoted on the spot to enforce competition and mission focus. However, leadership can amount to nothing if not directed at an objective and paired with a willingness to take risk. This is where Strauss’ quality of audacity enters the fray.

Strauss claimed audacity was “the warrior virtue that best embodies” Alexander.²³ He defined audacity as the ability to take “wild risk” but within calculated odds. It was about seizing the initiative and striking at the enemy center of gravity before he could strike at yours; as Alexander did at the Battle of Gaugamela. In the fall of 331 BCE, Alexander’s 47,000 men

¹⁷ Robin Olds, *Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace Robin Olds*, ed. Christina Olds and Ed Rasimus (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹⁹ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 238.

²¹ Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 213-214.

²² Phillip S. Meilinger, *Bomber: The Formation and Early Years of Strategic Air Command* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012), x.

²³ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 9.

with 7,000 cavalry faced off against Darius' approximately 250,000 men and 30,000 cavalry.²⁴

To accept battle with these odds was audacious if not insane, but Alexander tempered this "wild risk" by betting on the quality of his men and an aggressive strategy.

Strauss argued that Gaugamela was Alexander's greatest battlefield victory and overall was an exercise in audacity.²⁵ Alexander understood that Darius would have to attack and that this would occur on the flanks with cavalry.²⁶ Alexander innovated a new battlefield formation providing additional flank guards screened by cavalry to prevent the Persian cavalry from turning his flank. He wagered that his flanks, particularly his left under the command of Parmenio, could hold out long enough for him to strike directly at Darius.²⁷ Alexander's bet paid off. The Persian attack on his right wing opened up a gap in the Persian lines through which Alexander charged sending Darius into flight.²⁸ Parmenio held out on the embattled left and the Battle of Gaugamela broke any further organized Persian resistance.

We have already seen Lemay take a tactical risk by adjusting bombing runs over Germany; he looked at the situation, assessed the risk and reward, and led his troops to success. In the Pacific, he would risk more shedding doctrine and the Air Corps way of war to attain results. As commander of the XXI Bomber Commander, he concluded that high altitude bombing against Japan was ineffective based on bombing accuracy, weather issues, and B-29 engine problems.²⁹ His solution was low altitude nighttime incendiary raids. This change flew in face of Air Corps doctrine.³⁰ Lemay believed this risk was worth taking because of better

²⁴ Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 179.

²⁵ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 115 and 119.

²⁶ Ibid., 114.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Ralph H. Nutter, *With the Possum and the Eagle: The Memoir of a Navigator's War over Germany and Japan* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2005), 234-237.

³⁰ Ibid., 237.

weather at night, low altitude capabilities of radar bombing, and the lack of Japanese night fighters.³¹ The raids, although horrific by modern standards, were a great success. Loss rates were one percent, significantly lower than high-altitude daylight raids, and five raids in ten days destroyed 32 square miles of four Japanese cities.³²

The best example of Olds' audacity is Operation BOLO, the first and most successful MiG sweep of the Vietnam War.³³ The operation was conceived and planned entirely at the 8th TFW. The objective was to strike a decisive blow against North Vietnamese MiGs while honoring the restriction against bombing North Vietnamese airfields. Olds needed to lure the North Vietnamese MiGs into a fight, much like Alexander needed Darius to attack at Gaugamela to even the odds. The MiGs routinely avoided F-4s while attempting to intercept the F-105 fighter-bombers.³⁴ The ruse was simple, Olds would make his F-4s appear to the North Vietnamese as F-105s, lure them into battle and destroy them.³⁵ To accomplish this, the F-4s flew F-105 speeds, altitudes, and routes utilizing F-105 callsigns, communications, and electronic jamming equipment.³⁶ The ruse worked and seven unsuspecting North Vietnamese MiG-21s were destroyed with no American losses.³⁷ Following the operation, North Vietnamese MiGs remained grounded for two weeks.³⁸ Alexander, Lemay, and Olds showed great audacity and willingness to take calculated risks to achieve results. They often mitigated risk with tactical agility such as new formations, but the agility of all three had its limits.

³¹ Nutter, *With the Possum and the Eagle*, 236.

³² Ibid., 247-248.

³³ Olds, *Fighter Pilot*, 276.

³⁴ Ibid., 272.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 274-278.

³⁷ Maj Christopher H. Oliver, "Robin Olds: Leadership in the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing" (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command and Staff College, 2006), 21.

³⁸ Ibid., 21.

Strauss believed agility was the ability to adapt to new situations both on and off the battlefield.³⁹ On the battlefield it manifested itself in speed, flexible logistics, and a capability to wage multiple types of warfare. Off the battlefield it was the ability to step into a political role and solidify gains or retain influence, it is in this quality that all three of our commanders lacked. Alexander, according to Paul Cartledge, was all about conquest.⁴⁰ Having conquered the Persian Empire, he lost interest in governing it and continued his campaigns to the east.⁴¹ As Strauss put it, it was a failing of “knowing when to stop.”⁴² Lemay and Olds were not conquerors like Alexander, but they suffered from the same failure of agility, unable to adjust to the changing political landscape and reality of their situation.

While Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara thought Lemay was the finest combat commander he ever met,⁴³ a combat commander was not what the Kennedy and Johnson administrations needed in their Air Force Chief of Staff. Lemay successfully transitioned from a wartime commander to build SAC and helped to establish early Cold War airpower theory. As the Eisenhower administration gave way to the Kennedy administration, Lemay was the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff and soon to be Chief of Staff.⁴⁴ The Kennedy administration’s focus on Flexible Response did not align with Lemay’s preferred concept of preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Lemay’s inability to support the President’s policies was evident during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Lemay viewed war with the Soviet Union as inevitable and believed it would be better to initiate hostilities from a position of advantage.⁴⁶ He consistently

³⁹ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 10.

⁴⁰ Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 92.

⁴¹ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 10.

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Tillman, *Lemay*, 153.

⁴⁴ Ibid., vii.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁶ Kozak, *Lemay*, 348.

advocated for bombing the missile sites in Cuba, unable to provide President Kennedy a more flexible response leading Kennedy to rely primarily on his civilian advisers during the crisis.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Lemay viewed the Cuban Missile Crisis as a military defeat and not the diplomatic success it is considered today.⁴⁸

Like Lemay, Olds displayed agile leadership in combat but he could not adjust to the new political landscape he found himself in after leaving Southeast Asia. Olds left command of the 8th TFW to become Commandant of Cadets at the US Air Force Academy. Before reporting to Colorado Springs, he spent time in DC meeting with President Johnson, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, and the press. None of these meetings went well for Olds. His all in philosophy of war, similar to Lemay's, was at odds with the administration. He advocated for the expansion of the war to include bombing Chinese railheads and mining Haiphong Harbor.⁴⁹ While providing the best and candid military advice was well within his purview, he continued to let his frustrations get the better of him. While speaking to a group of students at a Midwestern university while he was Commandant of Cadets, Olds launched into a fierce rebuke of the Vietnam War. He blamed "Washington" for limiting the war and costing the US unnecessary casualties.⁵⁰ Following USAFA, Olds moved into an inspection job and then was quietly retired. Had he been more agile in his new post-war environment he might have been able to continue pressing for better strategy in Vietnam and possibly lead the transition from a SAC to Tactical Air Command dominated force where he could have brought his considerable skills in infrastructure to bear.

⁴⁷ Tillman, *Lemay*, 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁹ Olds, *Fighter Pilot*, 344-346.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 366.

The quality infrastructure has one of the strongest connections to airpower leaders.

Strauss acknowledged that “To win a war takes certain material things: arms and armor, ships, food, money, money, and more money. With enough money, you can buy the rest.”⁵¹ This statement is particularly true for Air Forces, which are hugely expensive and depend on technological advantages to win battles. In addition to maintaining these material things, Strauss argued that the quality of infrastructure also included the synergy of all parts of the army.⁵² Alexander benefited from the army his father created. It was a combine arms force with superb Macedonian infantry arrayed in a phalanx and a professional cavalry force.⁵³ He held the edge in combine arms over his enemies, Persian cavalry was good, but they had to rely of Greek mercenaries for infantry.

Alexander faced two issues of infrastructure. First, his kingdom needed money. He addressed this immediately following his victory at Gaugamela by marching directly to Susa and Persepolis to capture Persian riches ending his financial problems for good.⁵⁴ As his campaign continued east, he faced a second problem of replacing his Greek soldiers with local recruits.⁵⁵ Alexander never ignored these challenges even though his ambition eventually pushed beyond what his army was willing to bear.⁵⁶ While Lemay and Olds were not responsible for manning and equipping their forces, they still displayed adept care for their infrastructure in terms of training and the synergy of operations and maintenance.

Lemay held a laser focus on training which led to the establishment of lead crews or lead crew schools during all of his major command assignments. Lemay first applied his lead crew

⁵¹ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 11.

⁵² Ibid., 11.

⁵³ Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 60-61.

⁵⁴ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 239.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 239; Cartledge, *Alexander the Great*, 43.

concept in Europe. He determined that there were too many targets for each crew to study, so he divided them up amongst crews. They would each lead missions against their assigned targets.⁵⁷ The lead crews determined release points and led the entire wing into combat maximizing bombing accuracy due to their familiarity with the target. While commanding the XXI Bomber Command, Lemay relied on this approach to address a lack of training in replacement crews he was receiving from the states. New crews could locate a city but had difficulty identifying specific targets in an urban environment.⁵⁸ Lemay sent Joe Preston and Ralph Nutter to Muroc, California to set up a lead crew school to teach radar target identification in urban environments.⁵⁹ Lemay continued this approach to training as SAC Commander establishing lead crew schools and a relentless emphasis on training and bombing accuracy.⁶⁰

While Lemay exemplified training, Olds exemplified the synergy required between operations and maintenance. One case was his unique solution to issues with new air-to-air missiles. The 8th TFW was flying F-4Cs and since it was originally a US Navy aircraft it used the Navy's AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missile. When the 8th TFW upgraded to newer F-4Ds they were designed to carry the Air Force's AIM-4 Falcon air-to-air missile instead of the Sidewinder. The AIM-4's performance was substandard, often failing to fire and not one of the seven or eight missiles Olds fired guided successfully.⁶¹ Olds wanted the Sidewinders back but the F-4D was not designed to carry them. Olds had his maintenance crews design a work around and get the F-4Ds loaded with Sidewinders.⁶² The trust he built with the 8th TFW maintenance crews enabled them to provide a fix to the missile problem outside of normal maintenance

⁵⁷ Kozak, *Lemay*, 121.

⁵⁸ Nutter, *With the Possum and the Eagle*, 265.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁶⁰ Meilinger, *Bomber*, 160.

⁶¹ Olds, *Fighter Pilot*, 314.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 316.

procedures. Olds attempted to pass on the importance of the operations and maintenance synergy while he conducted inspections as the Inspector General and Director of Aerospace Safety at Norton AFB. On an inspection tour, he grilled the Wing Commander at Mather AFB on the status of Mather's B-52 engines and realized the Commander had no idea what the ground truth was. He proceeded to show him that the base engine shop was under performing while over manned.⁶³ It lacked the synergy and commitment Olds had cultivated in the 8th TFW. Olds' warnings went unheeded, SAC's infrastructure was crumbling, they lost five B-52s that year, four cited engine failure as the main problem.⁶⁴

This is not to say that Strauss' remaining qualities of ambition, judgement, strategy, terror, branding, and Divine Providence do not continue to play a role in what makes a great commander, only that their connection and impact on Lemay and Olds takes a back seat to leadership, audacity, agility, and infrastructure. This is largely because modern generals are not political, the decision for war and ultimate choice of strategy lies with the political leadership.⁶⁵ This changes the requirement of ambition from one of conquest to only that which is required to secure a place of leadership in the organization. Strategy and branding have become a joint effort with political leadership. The military commander's role is to provide their best advice for the final civilian decision. Here agility becomes more important, it provides the ability to integrate effectively with civilian leaders, or not, as we saw in the case of Lemay and Olds. It is difficult to discount terror when speaking of Lemay, but Strauss' assertion that the willingness to kill innocents was a secret to success does not apply today.⁶⁶ It is outside the law and norms of

⁶³ Olds, *Fighter Pilot*, 372.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 373.

⁶⁵ Strauss, *Masters of Command*, 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

modern state warfare. Divine Providence will continue to play a factor for all great captains, but it is hardly a quality one can cultivate. After all, as the old adage goes, “timing is everything and there is no justice.”

As modern airmen rise into leadership positions, they should focus on leadership, audacity, agility, and infrastructure. These qualities of great commanders align nicely with career and mentorship advice in the modern Air Force. Every officer can benefit from reading Olds’ concept of formal and informal authority and becoming adept at cultivating the latter and exploiting it judiciously. Audacity might as well be translated into “bold leadership.” Numerous guest speakers during the ACSC 2017 academic year have encouraged the students to lead boldly as staff officers and squadron commanders. They must assess and take risks. Agility is the one skill that will allow a commander to move from one level of warfare to another successfully. It is the skill required to be a combat flight lead, and then a squadron commander, and then adjust and become an effective senior leader and then general officer. Finally, infrastructure is a skill that is required. It amounts to the ability to pay “table stakes.” Without the ability to manage infrastructure the command will collapse unable to sustain itself. Infrastructure to the modern flying squadron commander is managing pilot upgrades, working with maintenance to ensure jets can be generated, etc. Most importantly, read about previous great commanders and great airpower commanders because Napoleon was correct if you want to be a great captain you must study them.

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